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ABSTRACT

A literature review examined the student population of community/junior colleges in contrast to the population (mostly 4-year college students) of the empirical studies reviewed by Feldman and Newcomb for their book "The Impact of College on Students" (1989) and also examined the factors involved in student self-selection of college. Studies indicate that while other higher education enrollments were declining, most community/junior colleges were rising, and within that population of students, there was an increasing percentage of minority and non-traditional students. Studies also reveal the average community college student to be a non-traditional student (female) who is 28 years old, comes from a middle to lower socioeconomic background, and attends part-time. The effects of college on the non-traditional students are similar to the effects on traditional students in that there may be a break from family and local community as well as a tendency to develop an independence of spirit. Also, increased personal tempo, self-esteem, and confidence seem to be more easily attained within a community college environment. Variables such as intelligence, socioeconomic status, size and type of community of residence, size of family, race, and religion, still influence college choice and enrollment plans for all students. Contains six references. (GLR)

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Emily Dial-Driver
ASHE 15th Annual Meeting
November 2, 1990

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This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held at the Red Lion-Jantzen Beach in Portland, Oregon, November 1-4, 1990. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

Emily Dial-Driver
ASHE 15th Annual Meeting
November 2, 1990

Feldman and Newcomb's Impact of College on Students: A Retrospective View/Relevance to the Community/Junior College

Virtually all of the almost 1500 empirical studies that Feldman and Newcomb review for The Impact of College on Students are based on students at four-year colleges and universities. Since the book was published, an increasing percentage of American college students have attended community and junior colleges, to the point that now slightly more than half of all college freshmen attend such schools. It seems then appropriate to discuss to what extent the conclusions of the book can be generalized to the impact that two-year colleges have on their students. It seems most important that two major subjects be addressed: the population of the community/junior college in contrast to the population of the empirical studies in the studied text and the factor of student self-selection of college in relation to a number of parameters.

Why bother hearing about the community/junior college anyway, those poor stepchildren in higher education? In 1980 Clark Kerr estimated that by 1990 90% of all first-time freshmen would be enrolled in community/junior colleges. He was mistaken in his figure, but the trend he pointed out is real enough.

Each decade since the 1930's the number of people attending the community college has increased. The total percentage of the population as a whole which attends college has also increased, but not at the proportionate rate of increase seen at the

community/junior college. In fact, today in a time of declining enrollments for many institutions of higher education, the enrollments for most community/junior colleges continue to increase.

According to Cohen and Brawer in their widely-cited book The American Community College, "enrollment has increased from just over 1/2 million in 1960 to more than 2 million by 1970, more than 4 million by 1980" (29). The ACE Policy Analysis and Research Report for Spring 1989 states that "over 43 percent of undergraduates, [and] 47 percent of minority collegiate students" ("Profile" 64) of the total student population in higher education are enrolled in community and junior colleges.

The percentage of minority students as well as the total number of minority students has risen relatively steadily since 1950: "College enrollments of all racial and ethnic groups reached record levels in 1988, and the proportion of college students who are members of minority groups climbed to a high of 18.4 percent, according to a draft of a report prepared by the U.S. Department of Education" (Evangelauf A-1); "minority students [are] more likely than white to attend public two-year colleges" (Evangelauf A-37).

In The Impact of College on Students, Feldman and Newcomb, and the quoted research, make the assumption that the college student is what is lately called the traditional college student, one entering college immediately after the completion of high school. The traditional student is no longer so traditional. The fact that the traditional college student is no longer the

only, or even the majority, college student in many institutions of higher learning is revealed by the very shift in terminology that now distinguishes and labels that particular kind of college student.

The average age of college students today is rising. The average age of the student at the college at which I teach is 29 years old. This figure is lowered somewhat by the large numbers of concurrent high school enrollees who have not yet completed high school. Our school sees, as do most--if not all--of the community colleges across the country, that the numbers of the traditional college students of the 1950s to 1970s (male, 17-24, upper and upper-middle class) are being slowly overcome by the numbers of non-traditional students.

The average community college student is a non-traditional student--"female, 28 years old, and from a middle to lower socioeconomic background, and attends part-time" ("Profile" 64). In 1974 Charles Monroe said in Profile of the Community College that "In general the enrollment of adult part-time students has risen from about 30 per cent in 1940 to about half the total community-college population. . . . The most obvious conclusion that can be drawn about the age distribution is that it is great" (192). From 1974 to 1988 the population changed and in 1988 "of the 5.0 million students attending two-year colleges, approximately 53 percent are female, 50 percent are older than the traditional 18- to 24-year-old college-age student and 67 percent attend part time" ("Profile" 64).

Even for the traditional college student, Porter comments in an NIICU publication that "While a six-year time frame for traditional-age students might seem sufficient, a considerable number of students are still 'in process' at public colleges and universities. Their final status has not been determined [in terms of completion rates], and this move toward a more prolonged undergraduate experience has serious implications. . ." (35).

If six years is not enough for completion, the traditional college student is likely to be getting even older. Commenting on the factor of age, Feldman and Newcomb state that a "source of variance in openness to change [in addition to individual personality, changes in society and technology, etc.] is the fact of age differences. Persons in or beyond their forties are like younger people in selecting their own age peers as their most intimate associates; and, unlike the younger set, they typically have as one of the things that binds them together a set of long-held attitudes" (323).

Much research that has been done lately in the fast-growing field of gerontology attests to the fact that people even older than forty are capable of intellectual and physical activity and of intellectual and physical changes. In fact, increases in physical activity and increases in intellectual <u>activity</u> lead to perceived increases in physical and intellectual <u>capability</u>. Perhaps openness to change is another aspect that could be increased by increased exposure to "change-making" inputs.

Perhaps one of the impacts of college on the older, non-traditional student might be the increase in changes, the

increase in openness experienced by those non-traditional students in the college classroom and atmosphere. It is true that for the non-traditional student, and for the non-traditional community/junior college student in particular, the effects of college probably will be attentuated by the fact that these students will spend less time on campus than the traditional students and will have no dormitory or other group living experience. Still, the fact remains that more research needs to be done in this field.

One interesting point about change that Feldman and Newcomb make is that "37 percent of the students who became less liberal during their first two years reverted back [sic] to their original positions during their last two years of college, whereas only 15 per cent of the students who became more liberal reverted to their original positions" (20). Perhaps this reflects the fact that the first two years of college are important for change in the area of political leanings, even if they do not seem quite as important as the last two. If education is truncated at the two-year level, would the 37 percent who became less liberal and the 15 percent who became more liberal not revert? Again, this is an unanswered question.

Later, Feldman and Newcomb cite Nasatir's 1965 study on political interest. Nasatir's study was longitudinal over the first two college years at the University of California at Berkeley and showed a change in 41 percent of the students surveyed. In 1967, using essentially the same sample during the same two-year period, Finey reports a 64 percent change in

political interest (21-22). While it is hardly likely that a community college will compare itself to Berkeley, it is just barely possible that this change in political interest might reflect the importance of the first two years of college. Well, it's possible!

It is hard to distinguish just what changes in college occur because of the college experience and what changes occur because of the natural maturation process. The difference between the changes experienced by those in college and those not in college might not be due entirely or even partially to the college impact. The difference in change might be due to the intrinsic difference between those students selecting college and those selecting other avenues. Plant (1962, 1965) argues that "at least on some characteristics--the college experiences had a 'facilitating effect' rather than a unique one on changes. That is, change in college students in certain areas, compared to changes by persons not going to college, are accelerated due to their experiences at college" (65).

According to Feldman and Newcomb, "the college experience aids students to make the break from family and local community and to develop an independence of spirit. . ." (39). Again this scenario is based on the traditional college student. However, in a way this scenario also functions for the non-traditional student as well since, of the returning adult women, some do not make a break from family but become a different contributor to the family and some in fact do break (or have already broken) from the family formed by marriage.

Feldman and Newcomb also comment that "the freshman may find it necessary to rescale his level of aspirations in different areas (sometimes upward, often downward). The personal tempo of life is apt to be changed: there are a variety of new day-to-day decisions to be made" (89). For the student known as the displaced homemaker, this situation is even more agonizingly true than for the traditional student. The change from stay-at-home wife--and usually mother of two--to college student with children in day-care is a culture shock of extreme magnitude.

In fact, according to Birney, Coplin, and Grose, (1960) and Baur (1965), "students themselves describe the freshman year as a hard or difficult one. . . . Not only does the freshman experience the frustration of finding new limits to his competence in some areas, he also experiences the pleasures of the discovery of new strengths in other areas" (90).

These statements are true for the non-traditional "she" as well as the traditional "he." Many of the returning adult students, especially the females--at least the females tend to be more vocal about it and less defensive--feel overwhelmed at the mere idea of returning to school after a lapse of five, ten, fifteen, twenty, or more years out of school. They are fearful that their abilities are lacking and fearful of trying to compete with all the "bright young things" whom they see in the classrooms. However, many of those same returning students are highly motivated, referring to themselves jokingly (and perhaps more truthfully than they know) as "over-achievers." With the success of the first semester these same fearful females become

the self-confident women who expect to succeed in school and who are not just after an "A," but after the top "A."

An important factor to consider is the effect of competition. The community/junior college gives the returning adult the opportunity, because of access, to increase self-esteem. The community/junior college is generally smaller and perceived to be of lower status academically than the higher status four-year college or university. These factors may well work in the favor of the community/junior college student. Davis and Spady, in separate research findings reported in The Impact of College on Students, both conclude that, "local grade-point average is a more important variable in influencing self-evaluation, and consequently, career decisions than is the calibre of the school one is attending." As Davis states, "counselors and parents might well consider the drawbacks as well as the advantages of sending a boy [what happened to all the girls in this study?] to a 'fine' college, if, in doing so, it is fairly certain he will end up in the bottom ranks of the graduating class. The aphorism 'It is better to be a big frog in a small pond than a small frog in a big pond' is not perfect advice, but it is not trivial" (239).

Variables, including intelligence, socio-economic status, size and type of community of residence, size of family, race and religion are "also related to college plans and enrollment" (107). For example, "students aspiring to a college education are more likely to come from a larger high school than a smaller one" (107).

However, these research figures for the four-year attendee in the 1960s may not apply to the community/junior college attendee, who has generally been characterized as older, part-time, perhaps of lower ability, female, and minority (Cohen and Brawer 31).

According to research in The Impact of College on Students, "students from lower status backgrounds appear to be more likely than students of higher status backgrounds to focus on such things as tuition costs, location of the college, and other practical considerations" (111). The conclusions drawn in the studied text may then be skewed so that conclusions about the community/junior college are not possible: the population of the community/junior college may be, prior to the onset of the research studies undertaken, substantially different from the populations studied, especially since, as Feldman and Newcomb state, "students do differentially select themselves into--and are differentially selected by--different kinds of colleges" (115). Thus, the simple selection of the community/junior college may skew the study population.

According to Feldman and Newcomb, "Studies have shown that there appears to be a 'fit' or 'congrence' between the average level of the specific needs of students and the particular environmental pressures" (133). This is again a statement that tells us that different students choose different colleges and different types of colleges. Such a self-selecting method may well mean that the community/junior college population is radically different from the populations studied in the text.

However, we must keep in mind that some students from the community/junior college do become transfer students and thus a member of a population similar to the ones studied.

According to High School and Beyond "nearly half of the 1980 high school seniors who entered two-year public colleges aspired to less than a four-year degree. . . . [but] Over 80 percent of the high school seniors who enrolled in four-year colleges planned to obtain at least a baccalaureate degree" ("Profile" 65). It may be because of this difference in aspiration, as well as the fact that so many community/junior college students are part-time students, that the completion rate reported in High School and Beyond for baccalaureate degrees of community/junior college students (within six years) is 18 percent ("Profile" 66). However, a Washington state study shows that "baccalaureate recipients who transferred from community colleges have the same distribution of degree majors, final year grades, and plans for the future as bachelor's degreee graduates who began their college careers at four-year institutions" ("Profiles" 66).

The authors go on to say that "Direct comparisons of student's changes during college years in different institutions . . . reveal no general tendency for individuals, independently of colleges attended, to increase their initial diversities. Rather, as in the case of academic majoring . . . it is a matter of 'fit' between the individual and the institutionally provided environment--a fit that represents a reciprocal adaptation of differential selection of student

recruits and of environmental characteristics provided by the institution" (145).

Peter Rose, quoted in the studied text, says that "we would surely find that there are as many kinds of students as there are schools which cater to their needs and expectations and that, at the very least, we can dispel, once and forever, the myth of the American student, which like the myth of the American Indian, is best left to novelists and writers of movie scenarios" (121). (My American Indian friends and acquaintances would like that stereotype to disappear from the page and screen as well as from the worldview of the population as a whole.) The democratization of college populations, partially due to more access to the community/junior college, is a contributor to the dispelling of the myth of the "typical" American student.

In a discussion of the sequences of experiences, Feldman and Newcomb comment that "we are not particularly surprised to find no indication that freshman-sophomore differences are larger than sophomore-junior differences in most of the change-areas under discussion in this section. . . . Only with respect to increases in nonauthoritarianism are freshman-sophomore differences the largest in the majority of cases. Even here, this is true for only slightly more than half of the comparisons, and certain technical considerations make interpretation difficult" (101-02). Again the authors comment that more research needs to be done in the area.

This constant theme is of course accurate, especially in relation to research in the field of the community/junior college

effect on students. How much effect do the first two years have on students? Is there a difference in effect in the atmosphere of the two-year and the four-year school? I would guess (and we all know what guesses are worth) that there would be a difference in over-all effect in the two-year and the four-plus-year college. The atmosphere of the two-year college is bound to be different from that of the four-year institutions because of the obvious factors of lack of upper division students, programs, and faculty, to name only a few. However, it seems also obvious that attendance in any kind of education must have some effect. Some community college students continue; all must be affected by their experiences in an environment foreign to many. We still need hard data on which to base the possibly erroneous conclusions to which many (myself among them) still come.

Feldman and Newcomb comment that "it seems plausible that those students who are more heavily challenged by the college environment will make greater changes than those who are less heavily challenged; thus it may be proposed that the college will have the greatest impact on entering students whose orientations are incongruent with the dominant orientation of the college" (276).

Thus, it may be that there is more impact on the students attending community/junior colleges than there is on students attending traditional four-year schools, since these populations are not largely the "traditional college student," continuing in the "school atmosphere" to which they are accustomed and in which they have been indoctriated successfully for thirteen years (I

say successfully or they would not have completed the thirteen years). As non-traditional students the community/junior college students were either not successfully indoctrinated (at least scholastically) or have passed beyond the era of their indoctrination by being part of the real world prior to enrollment in college. This tends to make the culture shock of college experience perhaps greater than it might be for four-year traditional students.

In refutation, Feldman and Newcomb state, about change in the first two years in four-year colleges and universities, that "most studies of change during the undergraduate years--with the exception, perhaps, of those dealing with changes in authoritarianism and closely related characteristics--do not point to the freshman or sophomore years as those in which change is particularly prominent" (313).

We must not forget that, as Feldman and Newcomb state, "One source of individual differences in openness to value change . . . lies in individual personality. It seems likely that colleges attract a disporportionately large share of young people who are relatively open in such ways. In any case, the college students typically confront a wider variety of challenges to existing attitudes than do their peers who do not go to college" (323). This is probably also true for the community/junior college student as well. Our non-traditional students enroll because they are not just open to, but actively seeking, some kind of change. Still the amount and direction of the change is not known because of the lack of research.

However, all, even the members of the community/junior college population can take heart from the book itself. The research is not clear on what effect colleges have on students over the age of the traditional college student. The research is not totally clear on how effects are different on different student populations. Research is lacking in the relation of effect in college to community/junior college students. These statements are major qualifiers for any conclusions. Even with all the qualifiers I have already made and the qualifiers in the studied text from Newcomb and Feldman, and even with the textual approach so far from revivalist, the authors tepidly conclude that colleges do in fact have some impact on students, above the not-so-simple factor of maturation. This conclusion can give us all hope--something is happening out there.

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